Louie, Portrait of a Corpse

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Abstract

Did you ever notice, sometime, when the lights are out and the shades are drawn, and you lie in your bed wondering where you’ve been and where you’re going and how you’re going to get there, how voices and echoes and visions from the past start sliding through your mind?...
Louie,

Portrait of a Corpse

DID YOU ever notice, sometime, when the lights are out and the shades are drawn, and you lie in your bed wondering where you've been and where you're going and how you're going to get there, how voices and echoes and visions from the past start sliding through your mind? And you flit from place to place and thing to thing in a willy-nilly, hodgepodge sort of fashion. And you remember things that are best forgotten, but you remember them just the same. And then a phrase or a face starts beating around inside your head and you try to stop it but you can't.

You think of people you never knew well, nor liked particularly, nor disliked particularly. But you think of them and they just sort of hang around inside your head. They shout at you from the recesses of your memory and you cannot hear them. They tried to tell you something once, but you did not listen. What did you miss? What did they say?

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THERE is a little town a hundred miles to the north. In this little town, people live and then they die and they will be remembered only as long as it takes the wind, screaming across a thousand miles of prairie, to wear down the pieces of granite at the head of their graves in the little cemetery by the brook. Little people leading little lives.

In this town is a man whose name is Louie. Louie is a good man, and the people in the town love him but they do not know him. He was not born here but he has been here long enough so that even the old men at the corner tavern do not know when he came or where he came from.

Louie is a big man and a quiet man. During the day, he works in the surrounding farms, and in the evening, he
drinks beer in the tavern on the corner until they close, and then he goes up to his room in the hotel with four bottles of beer in a sack under his arm. From the street outside the hotel, you can see the light in the window of the room on the third floor in the back go on, and then in a few minutes, it goes off again and you know that Louie is sitting in the dark drinking beer — thinking — and you wonder what he is thinking about.

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A LONG time ago, there was a little town a hundred miles to the north. In this little town, people lived and then they died and they will be remembered only as long as it takes the wind, screaming across a thousand miles of prairie, to wear down the pieces of granite at the head of their graves in the little cemetery by the brook. Little people leading little lives.

In this little town there was a young man named Louie with laughing eyes and a quick smile. He was strong and he liked to use his strength, playing baseball or working on the farm that would someday be his. When you looked into his eyes, you knew that he had a dream.

In this little town, there also lived a girl whose name was Ann. She was strong and slender like a reed, with long, silken hair that blew in the wind and sparkled in the sunlight. Ann, too, had a dream, and she was happy because she loved Louie and Louie loved her. On her finger, she wore a small, clear, stone which bound them by a promise to marry. Ann wanted only to be Louie's and to bear his children. More than anything else, she wanted children, for they would be an incarnation of their love and would grow as their love would grow.

One day, just a month to the day before they were to be married, Ann was tending the fire in the range in the kitchen. She didn’t notice a spark fly from the crackling wood and didn’t see the small flame inching its way up the lace on her apron until it was too late. She beat at it, but it grew bigger and angrily scorched her soft, young body.

Ann lay in agony for three days, never able to recognize Louie who sat by her bed. He needed only a smile or a look of recognition, but it never came.
As Ann lay in her coffin in the parlor, her friends and relatives walked past, but none could bear to look and the room smelled heavily of flowers and burnt, infected flesh. Louie sat with his head in his hands. He did not speak and no one spoke to him until, at last, when everyone else had left, Ann's mother came to him. She was a kindly woman and worn, for everything she possessed she had won by toil. "Louie", she said softly, "they have gone. Go now and take the ring from her finger while no one may see".

Louie rose, and giving her one long and sad look, he left.

Later, some said that they had seen Louie in a town only twenty miles to the east, but he did not know them. They said that he had lost his dream.

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WHEN you see the light in the room on the third floor in the back of the hotel blink out, you know that there is a man up there drinking beer and thinking. But this cannot be! He lies buried, clenched in a moldering hand bearing a tarnished silver ring. The wind slowly wears away the gray stone on his grave.


Shadows
 imply
 light,
 somewhere.

—Berta Moellering, H. Ec., Sr.